

Determiners

Determiners are grammatical elements that characterize nouns and modify them or make them refer to specific objects or actions. For example, in English:

This problem is complex.

“This” is a determiner that goes with “problem”. Together, they form a noun phrase. “This” indicates that “problem” refers to some problem that was raised or mentioned just before in the discourse.

This entry will present the different types of determiners. Then it will explain how they are acquired by children and what types of difficulties children with language impairment have with determiners. We will not give an exhaustive description of determiners, for lack of space, but will focus on the most frequent determiners found in language acquisition.

Determiners, by definition, are always attached to a noun. They are not used in isolation. If this is the case, then it is not a determiner but a pronoun (see “Nouns and pronouns”). For example, in “this is complex”, “this” is a pronoun that can refer to many things, and not necessarily to nouns. There are many languages where determiners differ from pronouns. This is the case in English for some determiners. For example, “your” in “your book” is a determiner and “yours” in “this is yours” is a pronoun. The difference between categories makes for a more transparent grammar, but in native use, the ambiguity is not problematic, as determiners are automatically integrated with the noun when listening to or producing language. In English, determiners always appear before the noun that they determine. In other languages, they can appear after the word. In yet other languages, they are tightly integrated in the nouns, as prefixes or suffixes, and not separate words as in English.

In English, determiners come in different subtypes:

- articles (the, a, an)
- demonstratives (this, that, ...)
- possessives (my, your, ...)
- quantifiers (some, much, ...)
- numbers (one, two, ...)
- interrogatives (which, whose)

Articles

Articles are the most frequent type of determiners in English. They are not present in every language. They are used in English to oppose reference to specific material (definite article such as “the”) to reference to generic material (indefinite article such as “a” or “an”). Most of the time, they are used for countable things only, and not for uncountable material, where no determiners are used. However, exceptions exist in idiomatic expressions. In many languages, the definite article comes from the diachronic transformation of a demonstrative determiner (see below) and the indefinite article comes from a transformation of the numeral “one”. These transformations did not occur in all languages

which explains why, in many languages of the world (for example Russian), there are no articles at all, though demonstratives and numbers can be used instead of articles whenever necessary.

Demonstratives

Demonstratives are words that are used to determine what the nouns are referring to. For example, “this problem” in the example above, refers to a problem that was just talked about in the discourse. This is called deictic reference, which can be spatial, temporal, for real-world objects for example, but also for language elements within the discourse. The distance referred to can have two values, such as the English “this” and “that”, which correspond to proximal and distal reference. Some languages use three values, proximal, medial and distal, such as the Spanish “esse” (this), “este” (that), “aquel” (far).

Possessives

Possessives are words that indicate the people whom an object, a quality, or a property, belongs to. Possessives can take all the persons that are found in verbs and personal pronouns: 1st person singular or plural (the speaker(s)), 2nd person singular or plural (the person(s) the speaker is talking to), 3rd person singular or plural (can refer to anything but the speaker and the interaction partner). For example in English, the singular possessives are “my” (1st person), “your” (2nd person), “his”, “her”, “its” (3rd person).

Development of determiner forms and disorders with the use of determiners

In languages that have articles, such as Italian, French, or English, articles are by far the most frequent determiners. This explains why they are produced very early by young children. English-speaking children use articles at the onset of the multiword stage, between 18 and 24 months of age. At the age of 36 months, children supply nearly 90% of determiners in obligatory contexts. This also explains why articles are not the category that is the most problematic for children with language impairment.

However, there are differences between languages with a similar high frequency use of determiners. For example, Italian- and French-speaking young children produce articles systematically at an earlier age than English-speaking children. The difference between these languages can be explained by differences in phonology, as proposed by Leonard’s Surface model. In Italian and French, the salience of the syllables that make the articles is high, so the articles are easy to reproduce. As suggested in the Surface model, the reproduction of the article is not costly, so they are produced easily. This is true for normally-developing children as well as for children with specific language impairment.

Possessives, and demonstratives especially, appear much later than articles in language development. For example, in French, whereas the article is productive by age 2;0, the first use of the possessive does not occur until 2;6. The number of possessives produced by children is more than 10 times smaller than the number of articles produced. Demonstratives are even more infrequent, as they are 10 times more infrequent than possessives, and do not appear before age 3;6.

Christophe Parisse¹ and Christelle Maillart²

1: Modyco, Inserm, CNRS & University Paris-Nanterre, France

2: University of Liège, Belgium

Further readings

- Abu-Akel, A., Bailey, A.L. & Thum, Y.-M. (2004). Describing the acquisition of determiners in English : a growth modeling approach. *Journal of Psycholinguistic Research*, 33, 5, 407-424.
- Leonard, L. B. (2014). *Children with Specific Language Impairment*. Second Edition. MIT Press.
- Parisse, C. & Le Normand, M..T. (2006). Une méthode pour évaluer la production du langage spontané chez l'enfant de 2 à 4 ans, *Glossa*, 97, 10-30.

Cross references

Grammatical Development
Language disorders in children,
Morphology
Adjectives and Adverbs
Nouns and Pronouns
Syntactic Disorders
Syntax and Grammar